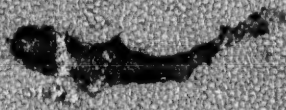


THE SINGING CHILD.



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The Singing Child,

BY

W. B. KING.

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THE SINGING CHILD.

I.

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It was not long after the death of that most virtuous prince, King Charles the Second, and in the reign of our late sovereign lord, King James, that I, Thomas Treadwell, clerk in Holy Orders, was presented by my Lord of Essex to the living of Elmtoft, being larger and wealthier than the parish of Queen's Lynn, the which for near ten years I had been holding.

And truly, I was grieved to part with the good people among whom I had dwelt so long, and from whom I had received no small kindness. Indeed, I doubted if I could have found it in my heart to leave them, had it not been that my faithful friend, Mrs. Elizabeth Long, brought me tidings that the good people of Queen's Lynn had already resigned themselves (not without inward affliction) to my departure, and had fixed on a godly young man from Beccles to be their minister. Thereupon, I wrote my Lord of Essex, accepting his good offer; and with many tears (the which on their part my parishioners restrained, though, I doubt not, with great difficulty,) I bade farewell to those who for so many years had borne with me in patience.

Scarcely, however, were we settled in our new vicarage at Elmtoft than my wife took occasion to fall sick and die, being Elizabeth, daughter of that worthy yeoman, Master William Curtis, of Brixton. She had been a godly woman, and, though of a family much inferior to mine, had brought me five hundred pounds at marriage, the same with which I restored the tower of our parish church at Queen's Lynn when it was near falling into ruin. The death of this excellent creature was to me a cause of

great inconvenience and vexation, I being but new come among a strange people, and scarce knowing where to look for assistance in my household cares, and the up-bringing of my seven years' son. For she had been a wife virtuous above the average; though at times a bit shrewish with her tongue, and likely to make me trouble among my people, the which, however, I was fain to pardon, she being but a female. Always too, did I have it in mind to break her of these unruly habits, but before I could accomplish it she died. Nevertheless did I mourn her loss by the wearing of doleful apparel, and with no small sighing I laid her to rest in our family burying place at Stratton Audley, beside my honoured father and Mistress Treadwell, my dear and honoured mother, being Dorothy, third daughter of Sir John Ringwood, Baronet, of Ringwood, a worthy man, who loss all in the cause of our late sainted King.

Standing by this good woman's open grave, I held the hand of my little son, who wept both loud and sore, making at this time his first acquaintance with death. All my care at the moment was to soothe and comfort him, for he was to me like the very sun in heaven for brightness. Even now, with his face all bestreamed with crying and not a little dirty, he was beautiful beyond compare. His form was slight, tall for his years, but nobly proportioned, taking after me. He had likewise that round, frank, fearless face with which our family hath been always blessed; and the large blue eyes, and handsome head of brown close-lying curls, for which I in my youth had always been admired. He had in him nothing of his mother, but a slight irregularity of curve in both his eye-brows, the which, as I truly think, was his only blemish.

Having filled in the grave and said our final prayer, we set out for London, the boy Charles (for I had named him after the best of kings, our pious martyr) ceasing to weep at sight of the many curious objects along the highway. At London we lay that night; and the next day did I take my son, to distract him from his grief, to view the wonders of that great city. We walked in the Mulberry Gardens, where we saw assembled persons of the highest quality, both wits and ladies, all arrayed in the newest

fashions out of France Then we went to view the sad scene where before Whitehall our blessed prince (for whom my father had sacrificed all) laid down his head to the axe of the traitorous fanatic.

Afterwards, by great good fortune we saw Queen Mary Beatrix then but late come out of Italy, ride by with much pageant to the Palace of St. James. But of all the entertainments with which we filled the day, none so interested my boy, as the burning at Smithfield of an unhappy woman who had murdered her husband, and the singing of the evening prayers in the great Church at Westminster.

Indeed it was the latter rather than the former, which pleased him most. No sooner did the long procession of white-robed singing-children appear, marching slowly up the great nave to the sound of the tuneful organ, than an expression of heavenly beauty overspread the young lad's face, and he clasped his little hands as if in prayer.

O, father!" "he whispered," it is like the blessed angels up in heaven with my honoured mother."

And indeed I had to check his emotion before he could collect himself to join in the evening prayer; the which, however, he did, bowing the head and bending the knee in great devotion, and never minding me or any that stood by, but lifting up his pure young heart to God. But whensoever the chant began the enraptured look would again beam in his face and eyes, and I was forced to hold my hand upon his shoulder to keep him still. And truly it was beautiful to hear the clear and heavenly voices rising and falling together with ravishing precision and sweetness, dying away in long and soft *Amens*, among the lofty columns and the dim and solemn aisles.

But when they sang the anthem my son could refrain himself no longer.

Father, I can sing it too," he cried aloud, to the amazement of the worshippers, "It is the piece by good Orlando Gibbons that we sang with Master Capel in our home at Queen's Lynn."

With great difficulty I restrained him that he should not join in, especially when one lad with a voice of angelic purity sang

alone the words, "*Why art thou so heavy, O my soul, and why art thou so disquieted within me? O put thy trust in God.*" For I had taught my son to sing this very thing, the which he could do full sweetly, Master Capel playing with his violin, and I also upon the harpsichord, making such music as was not to be heard in our parish or the next. When they had done, and all had sunk once more into silence, and we had knelt down again, the little boy whispered in mine ear :—

"Those words were for us, father. They tell us we must not grieve for my respected mother, but put our trust in God. Mayhap he will give me another parent, and thee another wife."

These words he spoke in all innocence, not knowing their full import; but they struck in upon my mind with such violence that I could no longer follow the common prayer, but wandered in my thoughts until the collect of St. Chrysostom told me that the service was at an end. Then asking Him on high that I might be pardoned for my lack of devotion, we left the great Church, the boy casting many backward glances to that place, which seemed to him like heaven.

On our way homeward, and indeed all that night, he prattled most sweetly of the woman burned at Smithfield, and of Master Gibbons' lovely anthem, as well as of the Queen, and the other sights we had seen that day; but I could not drive from my thoughts the painful circumstance in which I was placed, well-knowing that my situation might force me, as the boy had said, to take another wife. For how was I, a lone man, to care for a household, and also bring up this lad, Heaven's gift, in the matter of linen, food, and other trivial things to which the female mind alone is able to descend? And when I recalled the time and trouble I had been at in the wooing of that good creature, who was now no more, riding over to Brixton at least twice in the week, as well as putting myself to much needless expenditure in the matter of gifts (according to the rules in Master Tooter's book on *Conjugal Felicity*, the which I followed faithfully, taking a copy of it in my pocket every time I rode over to Brixton, and committing its precepts to memory on the way)—when, I say, I recalled this, tears rose to my eyes to think I must go through it all again,

at a time when I should be ordering affairs in my new abode, and thinking of matters more important.

The next day we set out for Elmtoft, I riding mine own quiet, grey horse, and holding the lad before me. It was a peaceful autumn day, and though the road was a lonely one we had little fear putting our trust in God, and expecting to be home before nightfall. All day the boy talked with artless sweetness in the same strain as yestereve, while my own thought travelled unceasingly over the difficulties which lay before me; seeing no other resource but to wed with all speed some godly woman of large means, and slow speech, if such there were to be found in all that countryside.

Meditating in this manner, and having arrived within a short distance from our home, I had ceased to ride with circumspection, and venturing (close to a wood called Abbot's Oak,) too near the hedge, a pair of highwaymen suddenly rushed out at me, one of whom caught my astonished horse by the bridle, while the other pointed a murderous looking pistol at my person.

My first thought was for my boy whom I shielded as best I could; though he, indeed, showed no signs of fear, being blest with that high courage for which our family hath ever been remarkable; for my grandfather had served in the Low Country wars, and had, with the assistance of another brave Englishman, slain a Spaniard in a battle. Calling this ancestral valour to my aid I addressed myself to the younger villain, (who covered me with the pistol) a tall and slender stripling of ruddy countenance, blue eyes and golden hair, and an expression of winning innocence, most unlike his colleague, who was short and dark, and of a fierce and dog-like countenance.

"Good gentlemen," I said, "you do not well to stop upon the King's highway an honest wayfarer like myself, being no other than a humble parish priest, likewise a widower, and returning even now from the sad obsequies of an excellent creature lately deceased, whom I have laid to rest in our family vault at Stratton Audley, beside my honoured father and my dear and honoured mother, being Dorothy, third daughter of Sir John—"

"Excellent sir," exclaimed the younger villain, "we have not

enquired concerning thine ancestry, nor of the purpose of thy journey. It is far from our custom to pry into any man's private affairs, further than the extent of his purse, and any small matters of rings or other trifles, not essential to his welfare, and valuable to us. Wherefore if there be in your possession either money or precious stones, I beg that you will deliver them to me without more ado."

"That will I not," I answered stoutly, "having here but five pounds in money, no more than sufficient for my own needs, as well as my onyx ring engraved with my family coat of arms, the time-piece my grandfather carried in the Low Country wars, and several intaglios of great value, left to me by a relative but lately gone to rest, and which I am now bringing home from London. For which cause, I pray you take that dangerous weapon from my breast, and suffer me to pass on."

"Good sir," replied the younger villain, "we be Christian men and opposed to violence, especially on the public roads where passengers may at any time go by; you will therefore accompany us to our nest at Abbot's Oak, where you will be our guest a little while, and if need be will find as good a grave as in your burying place at Stratton Audley."

Whereupon without more words they turned my horse into a little by-path in the thicket, which we followed nearly half an hour, arriving at length at an open space of greensward, in the centre of which there grew an ancient oak, which had given the forest its name.

Here we were joined by three other dangerous looking cut-throats, one of whom snatched the boy from my arms, hurling him violently to the ground, while the others, after causing me to dismount, stripped me of my coat, my hat, my hosen, and my boots, then proceeding to bind me to the tree with some cords they had brought out of the thicket for the purpose. Presently I was tied hand and foot to the oak's trunk, being all unable to make any resistance, except that I ceased not to upbraid them, calling them Amorites, Babylonians, Sons of Belial, and other such-like names but never going beyond Scripture.

Having thus rendered me powerless they proceeded to rifle

my pockets, and my wallet, one of them also tearing the onyx ring from my finger, though I reminded him that my family coat of arms would one day betray him and bring him to the gallows. But I spoke to no purpose; for they robbed me even of the tress of my dear wife's hair, the which I valued high as a charm against warts; being informed by a good wife of my acquaintance, that kept in a place of safety and tied with a green ribbon, it would surely answer that purpose. Having despoiled me of all I had upon me, they proceeded to quarrel as to the distribution of their booty, each one despising the intaglios, which were most precious and endeavouring to gain possession of the money, using meanwhile most dreadful oaths, at which I could not but shudder.

All this time my little boy looked on in great astonishment, not understanding the proceedings nor why his father should be so shamefully entreated. Indeed he had at first made furious attempts to prevent their violence as they bound me to the tree, rushing at them with all his little might and not ceasing till one of them (a bloodthirsty monster) seized him in his arms, and threw him, as one might throw a dog, some twenty feet away. Now, however, seeing me abandoned, and the robbers retired to a distance, he came to my side once more, looking up into my eyes with such an expression of bitter misery as I had never before seen in a young child's face, and before which I was fain to close my eyes that I might not look upon his grief. Presently there came a trembling of his lip, and then with a very loud heart-breaking cry, he rushed to me, burying his face between my knees, and sobbing in such a manner that his whole frame was racked convulsively, I being powerless even to place my hands upon his head to comfort him.

Thus he wept, until the sound of his sobbing disturbed the group of villains, who had not yet settled their disputings. Then up spoke one of them—the dog-faced Canaanite who had first rushed at me on the road—saying:—

“John, take thy club and dash that brat's brains out. He will bring all the sheriffs in the county on us, if he continues that dog's-howling.”

Whereat the stripling with blue eyes and golden hair, seizing

a monstrous club that lay beside him, rose from the grass and came towards us.

The lad having heard the words spoken, suddenly desisted from his weeping, and turning from me, faced the approaching villain with that look of courage, with which, as I do not doubt, my grandfather faced the Spaniard in the Low Country wars. With a few long strides the villain was beside us—the boy looking up into his face, with the fearless gaze of innocence.

In an instant the robber had swung the club above his head, uttering at the same time a most fearful imprecation. The boy neither winced nor removed his eyes from the tall stripling's face. For me I could do nothing but pray, with such ardour as sure no father ever prayed before; beseeching God that the hand which took this young child's life might in the same hour take mine also.

For a moment the club was brandished in mid-air. Then it fell—but on the grass, where the blue-eyed villain flung it with all his main.

"Thou art too pretty a little boy!" he muttered, adding an oath which I will not here set down. Then seizing the lad in both his arms, he raised him in the air, clasped him for one brief moment to his breast, and then placing him gently on the ground walked hastily away.

Whereupon my boy and I did not delay to thank God for His merciful deliverance, praying at the same time that we might be saved altogether out of the power of the enemy.

Presently it drew towards night, and the robbers retired further into the thicket, leaving us completely alone. By this time I was feeling sore distressed in my person by reason of the constrained attitude in which I was bound, and suffering much from want of food and water, as well as from divers flies which abounded in that wood. In so solitary a place, and so far from the highway, none were like to come to our succour, nor did we see any living thing but a few strayed sheep which at sunset crossed the greensward, and my old horse, which was grazing quietly near by. At intervals the voices of the villains were heard by us, from their haunt in the thicket, when some burst of

laughter, or storm of curses, caused them to speak louder than was their wont. Presently, however, as night deepened even these sounds sank into silence. The lad, wearied with the long day, slipped down at my feet, and resting against me as best he could, fell asleep. The birds had ceased to sing; the stars came out; and in all that solitude there was no sound except the snorting and munching of my horse, and the twitter of the insects in the wood.

How long a time went by. I know not; for I too, notwithstanding all my pains fell into a gentle slumber. Suddenly I was waked. It was no longer dark, for a great, golden moon at its full had risen just above the tree-tops, making the stars pale, and turning the sky to a deep, imperial purple. The boy had stirred; he was kneeling upright on the cool grass, gazing at this to him new wonder, of the moon shining on the world of night. I gazed down at him in silence, not knowing how to address him in this sad situation; when suddenly there burst from him a strain such as I never expect to hear again until I stand amid the serried hosts around the Throne. It was the anthem we had heard in Westminster the previous eve, and which I had taught him long before, playing, to his singing, on the harpsichord, with good Master Capel accompanying with his violin.

"Why art thou so heavy, O my soul; and why art thou so disquieted within me?"

Then loud and clear, like the song of an archangel soaring through heaven itself, there rose this pure and faultless voice, ever mounting higher, ever waxing fuller and more strong, as if it would leave all earth behind, and pierce to the very Throne of God.

"Oh, put thy trust—put thy trust in God—in God—in God—in God!"

No bird pouring forth its song in the sunlight, no chorister chanting in the vast cathedral choir, I had almost said no angel worshipping on Heaven's sapphire floor, ever flooded the air with a sweeter, louder, more enthralling burst of mingled melody and prayer. Small wonder was it that the tears came to my eyes,

and flowed freely down; while I failed not to bless my Maker who had lent to me this precious offspring.

Scarcely however did the last full burst in *God* cease to resound in the moon-lit woodland, while he himself still knelt on, as if in silent prayer, than I descried a tall, dark figure moving swiftly towards us from the thicket. I soon perceived that it was the younger villain, and that he bore in his hand a knife whose blade flashed in the moonlight.

Coming close beside me he whispered,

"Good man, get thee gone, with all speed; but silently lest my comrades should have hint of thy departure."

Whereupon he cut my thongs with the knife he bore, saying meanwhile,

"I cannot endure to hear such singing. I also could sing such sweet things once, when I was chief among the choir in the great black church at Ely. Those days are long gone by, and I shall never again wear the white robes of innocence. And here be a stale bannock for thy supper. Thou canst eat it whilst I catch thy horse."

So saying he slipped away, while I, glad to be free, donned my coat and boots, thus being prepared to mount when he returned with the horse, the which he speedily did, having it already bridled and saddled for my use. When I had mounted he took the boy in his arms, again pressed him to his breast, and kissing him hastily, placed him astride before me. Then taking the horse's head the villain led him gently over the greensward and into the by-path by which we came, acting as our guide until we were once more upon the highway.

All this time we spoke no word, fearing to be overheard by those who even already might be aware of our flight. But when we had attained the public road, and his assistance was no longer needful, I addressed him thus:

"Good cut-throat, you have this day done great harm to me a simple gentlemen, as likewise to this blessed child, already asleep once more through sheer weariness. Yet have you atoned somewhat by giving us our liberty, and not leaving us in the power of yonder Moabites, who I doubt not are worse than you.

Well do I perceive that all good is not extinguished in you, in that you have still a heart that can be moved by the singing of God's angel, for little short of such do I believe this child to be. Know then that there is music lovelier by far than that which you have heard to-night, the music of the sinner's voice acknowledging his guilt before his God. No song you ever chanted in the great church at Ely will sound so sweet in Heaven as that. Farewell, gentle villain; may God guide you back to honest ways."

So saying I whipped up my horse, and rode away, leaving the half-repentant robber gazing after us through the moonlight. The stars were fading and the dawn was near, ere we reached our home at Elmtoft, the which, however, we accomplished without more mishap.

II.

The morrow having come, I found my grief for my wife (that excellent creature) much assuaged by the fact that the pious women of my flock had already looked out for me an honest person to keep my household and minister to my daily wants—one Mrs. Watchful Wake, a widow of good report, well-skilled to bake, and brew the new herb called tea or tay (then but late come in from outlandish parts) as well as to compound divers cordials of great efficacy in time of sickness, and which she oftentimes administered to me, I being somewhat unwilling. She was indeed a woman of strong purpose, of whom I quickly came to stand in awe, her virtues being far above the common, of which she could not be unaware. She it was who, in the days of Oliver the Usurper, had (after the manner of the Patriarchs of old) changed her christened name of Jane to *Watchful*; being appointed, as she herself affirmed, to scan her neighbours' doings, and whensoever she perceived any failing or defect to herald the same abroad so that others might be warned, and fear in like manner to go astray.

For which cause the pious women of my flock had placed her in my household, knowing that if I should err in conduct or slip in speech (I being but a sinful man) the same could not be hid,

for Mistress Watchfull would quickly publish it, so that all might be aware how feeble and unrighteous a man they had to be their minister. And in this manner this worthy dame was of no small help to me, I being given to ways of jest and pleasantry, for which Mistress Watchful, that excellent widow, would oft rebuke me, as I doubt not, was my due.

In face she was not uncomely, though long past her bloom; but that was of small account to me, I still wearing the habiliments of woe, and well-knowing that I could have no perception of woman's beauty till at least a year was out. My boy took to her at first somewhat unkindly, as likewise did she to him, calling him no Samuel, but a wicked young Hophni and Phineas, which would bring grief to his father's heart. For this she had no cause, saving that the lad in a moment of vexation had once strewn her bedgown with briars, and had also put a handful of salt in her tankard of beer, for which fault I myself (though my heart bled) beat time with a rod every morning for a week, likewise keeping him for near ten days on the bread and water of affliction, forbidding him to sing in the church during all that time, so that he might fear to offend again; the which he did.

For by this time it was came to pass that the lad sang every Sunday in our parish church, standing with the other singers, but lifting up his voice with much more beauty than all the rest, they being for the most part untuneful, and not skilled in the music of our late meritorious composers. For from the time of our coming home to Elmtoft he did not cease to implore me to let him sing in the house of God, like the white-robed children of the Abbey. Though for sometime I withstood him, I at last granted his request, and on a given Sunday I admitted him among the singers. By this time (moved by a sentiment of gratitude to God who had of late delivered me from danger.) I had taught them all to sing Orlando Gibbons' anthem; giving the one-voiced part to the lad, who alone could chant it meetly. But so it happened, that as soon as all the other singers ceased, and the boy's notes rang out alone, Mistress Watchful Wake arose in her place, and declaring that no popish songs should be sung in her hearing, walked in dudgeon from the church.

No sooner was the service ended than all the sidesmen, beadle and churchwardens, assembled to me in the vestry, in great concern lest the excellent widow should have taken dire offence.

"Twere not wise to drive away the faithful," said worthy Master North, the warden.

"Truth there," quoth Sidesman Gidley, "they be hard enough won."

"But some clergy have a poor way," said Beadle Josiah Dillard. "'Twere not our last good minister's manner to fray the widow and orphan from the church. He were an excellent, worthy man."

"We're not like to see his equal soon," said Master North. "What say you, Sidesman?"

"His like be not bred in these days," quoth the Sidesman. "He were powerful to expound the Word."

"Never less than an hour and a half in length," said Beadle Josiah Dillard. "Not that we'd say anything against thee, Master Treadwell. Thee be'st not so bad for a beginner, but all thy expounding is simple and plain to the understanding. 'Twere not so with our last good minister. The wisest could not understand him. Ah, he was a learned man!"

"No," quoth Master North, "we have nothing against thee, Master Treadwell—yet. Thee be'st but new come among us, and we know not what be thy faults. And it cannot be laid to thy door, if thou hast not the talents of our late good pastor. We do not look for it. But 'tis sad to see the shepherd drive the poor lamb out of the fold."

"'Tis spoke in a figure. Master Treadwell," said the Sidesman. "Good Widow Wake be the lamb; thou be'st the shepherd. She've been long a member of our parish."

"Ay," said Beadle Josiah Dillard, "I can recollect her as a regular attendant ever since she come to live in these parts. She be a Ely woman by nature—leastways 'twas there she buried her husband. But, whatever land or nation she sprung from, she've been a woman of light in this parish for nigh twenty years."

"And very virtuous," quoth Master North, "and likewise

godly. She've a great gift of judgment. There be few characters she cannot find a fault in."

"Therefore," said the Sidesman, "'twere a pity to give umbrage to the saints. Thee 'lt have enow to do, good Master Treadwell, in driving the wicked to reproach thee, without angering the Lord's chosen. Not but what the boy sings pretty."

"Aye, that he does," said Beadle Josiah Dillard. "I could sing like that myself in days ago. Do you mind, Sidesman, how us young ones used to sing 'God rest you, merry gentlemen,' in the Christmas waits? And me the loudest of them all."

"'Twas a foolish time," quoth Master North, "and before the war, when men's minds were in darkness. We be done with such heathenries in these days. And so, good Master Treadwell, we hope you'll not trample the fatherless and widow under your proud heel, but conduct yourself with the meekness and humility of one appointed to minister to a sanctified people, counting yourself but dust."

"'Tis spoke in a figure," said the Sidesman. "But with this we'll take our leave, Master Treadwell, wishing you no evil." And so they said farewell, I standing just where they had found me, saddened and amazed, persuaded that I must be guilty and yet ignorant of mine offence.

In deep meditation I made my way into my own house, paying no heed to the boy, who came to meet me at the door in expectation of a word of praise. Passing him without attention, I sought my accustomed seat in the library, where I sat and pondered, sorely puzzled in my mind as to how the song of praise could offend the ear of virtue. For this I found no explanation save that my own foolish heart must have been darkened by too much love for the boy, and pride in his wonderful gift of singing, and that thus our offering was not acceptable to God.

Musing in this way I did not perceive the door pushed open, and the lad himself approach, who, laying his hand upon my knee and gazing upwards into my face with those large blue eyes which seemed to me like wells of truth, addressed me thus: "Respected sir, were you not pleased with my singing to-day that you look so sad? Were any of my notes wrong?"

"No, my son," I answered, taking him upon my knee, "thy notes were not wrong, and with thy singing I was but too well pleased."

"Then may I not sing next Sunday the setting we made from Palestrina. Thou knowest the one I mean. It begins, '*The darkness is no darkness with thee.*' I can sing it immediately when thou has said, *Lighten our darkness* out of the common prayer. Oh, if only good Master Capel were here with his violin! Can we have the violin in Church, father?"

"I fear not my son," I said.

"Is the violin a sinful instrument father?"

"People might think it so."

"'Tis strange," he said, "when the blessed angels play on harps and violins in heaven."

"How knowest thou?" I asked.

"I saw it in a picture," he responded. "And is the harp also a sinful instrument?"

"I cannot tell, my son," I answered sadly. "Some things be held sinful at Elmtoft that were not so at Queen's Lynn."

"But howsoever, we can have the anthem?"

"I fear not," I said.

"Oh father, why?"

"Good Mistress Wake, the excellent widow, did not like thy singing in the church to-day, nor did others. They care not for such music. And I much misdoubt, my son, whether you and I lifted up our hearts to God as truly as we ought. Master North, and Sidesman Gidley, and Beadle Josiah Dillard are all godly men. They must know what is right."

"Did Mistress Wake, the excellent widow, go out of Church because I sang?"

"She did my son."

"Is she a very holy woman?"

"She is, my son."

"Is she more godly than thou?"

"Thy father is but a sinful man," I said, "and Mistress Wake has been a woman of light for twenty years."

"And yet she did not like my singing. 'Tis very strange."

And with these words he slipped from off my knee, and went slowly from the room.

Next day I would have sought an interview with the excellent widow, but before I could compass it, she had finished her household duties and departed into the town, where she lifted up her worthy voice to all with whom she came in converse (and they were many) affirming that I must be sent by the Pope of Rome to subvert these kingdoms—and bidding everyone beware of me; all of which I afterwards learnt from good Mistress Tabret Tall, with whom at this time I came to be in confidence.

And so that it fell out that in the afternoon when, as my custom was, I took my walks abroad among my flock, many addressed me on the subject.

Scarcely I passed my own gate than I encountered worthy Mistress Datchet, that pious widow, who said :

"Good morrow, Master Treadwell. I suppose you are going out to see your friends? Of course I do not expect you to come to visit me, being but a very poor widow, with no rich viands and luxurious cheer to set before you. It is nigh unto six months since your good lady departed, and in all that time you have not darkened my door but seven times. However, you've got your music to practice, and I know that must keep you busy, judging by what we heard on Sunday. Good Mistress Watchful, that excellent widow, saith the sound of outlandish music is never silent in your house, with your playing on the flute, or the harpsichord, or teaching that little boy to sing. Ah, well! there be some who think that is the way a man of religion should pass his time, instead of being on his knees, and reading of his Bible. I think I have read somewhere of the end of those with whom the harp and the viol and the tabret—the *Tabret*, mark you, good Master Treadwell,—were in their feasts, and it was not well. And so I wish you good day, worthy sir, for I must be going."

With this the pious dame passed on, I comprehending but little of her meaning.

After this I went to see one Mistress Longsword, wife of one of our wardens, a most estimable dame, long confined to the house with a certain ailment. Her I found propped up with

pillows and sitting at her window, it being all her company to look out at the passers-by.

After saluting each other in due form, and enquiries concerning the worthy woman's health, she bade me be seated, and speaking in a high, shrill tone, which, I doubt not, was the effect of sickness, went on to deal with the affair of yesterday. And indeed she was most kind, offering me all her sympathy, and that of her husband likewise.

"We be your best friends, kind sir," quoth she. "My husband always upholds your merits when the rest of the parish set thee at nought; and, as for me, I always endeavour to put the best construction on your actions. And I trust you are worthy of it, sir, which I doubt not you will try to be. Whenever any of the good wives of the parish would deery thy talents I say to them, 'What more can ye expect, in a small place, lying retired in the country? Can we hope to have a man of parts, as though we were a great parish in London?' I tell them always that thou dost the best thou can'st according to thy lights; and if thy lights be few 'tis the fault of nature, and no one can call it thine."

"I thank you, good mistress," I said humbly. "I do not deserve your kind opinion, being but a sinful man."

"That may be," the worthy dame went on, "but I am apt in zeal for charity to think of others above their merit. 'Tis a weakness of mine, for which Mistress Wake hath oft rebuked me. And yet I have that spirit which inclines me to defend the absent; and I always say of thee, kind sir, that you might be worse, thus putting to silence all who speak against thee. For 'tis a censorious world, Master Treadwell, and there are few men who suit us here in Elmluft to be our pastor. He needs must be a man above the average in whom we should not see more than one defect. Our standard is very high, and 'tis not very like that you will be able to come up to it. 'Tis not your fault, sir, and so I tell everybody; 'tis nature's."

Once more I thanked her, feeling in all simpleness my own unworthiness. At the same time I rose to depart.

"The boy is a pretty singer, my husband tells me," she said as I was about to go. "I trust such gifts will not make him vain.

But 'tis most probable they will, he having no mother to rebuke him and warn him against pride. You must have a mother for him, sir; not that it will matter very much, for I fear you will not keep him long. Those gifted children seldom live; and besides he looks delicate."

But I could not endure to listen to this last remark, each word being like a separate stab in my inmost heart; and so, hurriedly, I left her presence.

By this I gained but little, for in the street I encountered good wife Susan Tremlet, an aged body, walking with a stick, but held in much repute through all that countryside for a knowledge of charms, and a gift which enabled her to foretell the future. To her I addressed myself, in that courteous manner for which our family hath ever been remarkable, enquiring with much concern about divers pains with which her body was racked and adding expressions of my sympathy.

"'Tis good of you, sir, to give me a word of comfort," she said, "especially when you're like to want many such words yourself. You be a good man, but I doubt if you will be a happy one. As soon as I first saw you in the church I perceived the signs of sorrow on your brow, and in your hand. Ah, you cannot deceive old Susan Tremlet! And did not your wife die immediately after that? I saw it! I saw Death in your fingers as you turned the pages of the Holy Book! But she were a poor, sickly body at best, I fear; and the boy takes after her. Your second wife will never be troubled with a step-child. 'Tis always unlucky for a parish when the minister's family be sickly; they are apt to want help, and be a burden on the people. 'Tis a good thing you have only one, worthy sir, for when he is taken, there will be the fewer to provide for. Well, we must all weep for our sins, I trow, and I doubt not you be a great sinner yourself, sir, for there's very few I hear speak well of you. Your discourses be either too long or too short, too hard or too plain. In your common walk you be either too cold or too friendly, and in your house there be strange sounds of fiddling, which accord not well with the life of a holy man. But when the boy is taken I make no doubt but what you will repent, sitting in sackcloth and

ashes as a minister should. And so farewell, good sir: and thank you kindly for the bacon and the red flannel you sent to me last week. They be not so good as our late respected shepherd used to send; but I suppose it be all you can afford. 'Tis a dark prospect for a parish when the minister's family be poor as well as sickly."

Making a respectful curtsy the dame (a worthy person) hobbled away with the help of her stick, not knowing how sore a wound she had left behind in my poor heart. And indeed it was a wound which had small chance to heal; for all that day, and many days after, the pious members of my flock addressed their remarks to me in the same tenor, till I was so weighted with a sense of mine own infirmity that I scarce felt fit to walk the earth. This, however, I could have borne, knowing myself to be a sinful man; but all my heart cried out whenever any spoke of the lad as like to be taken away from me. This I could not believe; I said God could not try me so; it would be more than flesh could bear; and besides he had no look of weakness, but only a skin clear and as white as wax, with veins which rivalled the turquoise stone for blueness. Still, I prayed to God night and day, that if He should be pleased to take him, I might be taught the lesson of being humble, and might learn to wait upon His Will.

All my comfort at this time was in the company of one Mistress Tabret Tall, a spinster lately past the summer of her life, but full of sympathy for all my troubles, and likewise of an excellent understanding. This good woman ever stood my friend, inviting me to her modest cottage, and regaling me with a certain posset of whose making she possessed the secret. Also did she hem kerchiefs for me, and knit me several pair of good, stout hosen, as did at other times Mistress Long, that excellent female, of Queen's Lynn. Whenever I was sore distressed with care, I would betake myself to good Mistress Tabret's little garden, where, sitting in an arbour, I would pour forth all my confidence, to which the good spinster would listen with every kindness, giving me much excellent advice. Likewise did she win the affections of my son, calling him a poor, motherless darling, and giving him

certain cakes and sweetmeats to which he was inclined. Many a time she would turn to me, her eyes all bedimmed with tears, saying, "Oh, how he needs a mother!"—to which, however, I could not reply, my year of mourning for the excellent creature lately deceased, not yet being out.

At times, when the weather was fine, I would carry my flute into her little arbour, and there we would sit in friendly converse, she knitting a pair of hosen for my wearing, and I at intervals playing on the instrument most sweetly. At one time my tune would be a merry one, such as "Come to the Maypole," or "Foot it Lightly"; at others, I would choose some tender air, like "Willow, willow," or "I Attempt from Love's Sickness to fly in vain." On such occasions the good spinster would let her knitting rest upon her lap, and beat time gently with her hand to my playing. For in truth she had a love of music, and would oft tell me that sweet sounds had been heard at her birth; for which cause her parents had named her *Bring-Hither-The-Tabret*, after the fashion of those fanatical times. But of all the tunes which she loved to hear, that of the incomparable poet, Ben Jonson, "Drink to me only with thine Eyes," was the one which pleased her best. This melody I would often play, giving its cadences a very speaking fall, knowing well how to express in music the tender sentiment of love, having inherited that power from my grandfather (the same which fought in the Low Country wars) who had married three wives, and had had issue by them all. When I had played this air *Mistress Tabret* would thank me with all courtesy, pouring me out at the same time a libation of the posset and gently constraining me to drink. This done (and to give our intercourse a serious turn) we would fall to speaking of my last Sunday's sermon; the which she was often pleased to term a heavenly discourse, her understanding being far above the average. Thus did I take great comfort in this good spinster's company, until an unhappy occurrence deprived me of her friendship also, I remaining to this hour all unwitting of the cause of my offence. It chanced one day, while we were sitting in the arbour and I having ceased to play the tune of "Come lasses and lads," had laid my flute upon the table, that my little son was rollicking on

the grass near by, in company with a young spaniel dog. And a pretty sight it was to see them making merry in their gambols, as the manner of young things is, they having but little thought of care. Upon whom the worthy spinster casting her eyes, said, as she had often said before, "Oh, how he needs a mother!" And as I did not reply, she went on to add :—"I have observed that his clothing is washed with little or no amidon, and I doubt if his linen is ever laid away in lavender. I cannot but fear lest evil should overtake a child brought up in that way. And he is so good and pretty, poor, motherless orphan!"

Upon which the kind creature's eyes filled with tears, and as she turned them towards me with an expression of much sympathy, I was so far moved as to venture to address her thus :

"Good spinster, the year of mourning is not past for that worthy female now no more : and there are thoughts which I had intended to keep hushed within my bosom until that sad time be over, well knowing what is due from a man of understanding towards a faithful creature, who has likewise been a docile and obedient wife. And if I now pour forth my feelings in your ear, 'tis not from any hastiness or impropriety, but from being moved by your so great and constant sympathy. Wherefore I crave your leave to speak, that you might know all that is in my heart, and counsel me as you think best."

"Oh, speak, speak!" she murmured, "I have long looked forward to this hour."

Whereupon I felt encouraged to continue, and thus went on:—

"As soon as I had laid that excellent creature to her rest in our family burying place at Stratton Audley, it was borne in upon me that one day this young child would require a mother's care. Before ever I reached London, after the sad obsequies, I saw that I could not give him that solicitous attention in trivial things in which the female mind is versed. Had it not been for the maternal providence of good Mistress Wake, I doubt not but that there would have been more grievous defects in his apparel than a want of amidon ; for in truth I am a man of books, rather than one gifted with an insight into household things. For which reason, as well as for other causes that I need not name, I have

long resolved that when my year of mourning is at end I shall speedily set myself to wed some worthy person, who will be skilled to keep my house and care for my son's welfare. Wherefore, good spinster, if there be among your acquaintance any godly woman, likely to suit my needs, I pray you name her. I would have her a woman of means and some beauty, likewise endowed with a slow speech; and," I added, with my accustomed gallantry, "something like yourself, good spinster—only younger."

Whereat, from some cause quite unknown to me, Mistress Tall rose up in exceeding dudgeon, bursting into loud expressions of displeasure, calling me a monster, and a heartless libertine; the which name I never yet did merit, being ever of most scrupulous and decent conduct. Also did she upbraid me with the kerchiefs she had hemmed, and the hosen she had knit me, as likewise for all the posset she had mingled, (the same being made after an excellent preparation, whose secret I could not learn.) After which she burst into a loud and lamentable weeping, declaring she had nursed a viper in her bosom; I not comprehending what she meant. And if I strove to comfort her, immediately she would lift up her voice ten times louder than before, until I was in great fear lest the neighbours round about should hear her wailing. Then after upbraiding me once more, she pointed to the portal bidding me "Begone!" the which I was very glad to do, taking up my flute and quitting her worthy presence with great diligence and speed.

And thus through no fault of mine I lost the friendship of this pious female, not knowing to this day, why from that time forward she forsook the worship of our parish church, going twice every Sunday to Westhampton Church where the preaching is both shorter than, and much inferior to mine.

III.

Not long after this it chanced one day, that sitting in the little apartment where we took our repasts, and the door of the kitchen being ajar, I overheard a conversation between good Widow Wake and my little son. For by this time it was come about that they were more friendly than heretofore; this virtuous female not being able to resist his pretty ways, nor to hold out against the affection of which his young heart was full, and by which the hardest nature must be subdued. On this occasion (as I saw by glancing in) the kind widow was paring apples, which she held in a receptacle of tin upon her lap, the boy sitting on a low stool at her knee, and receiving from her hand such portions of the fruit as were not good enough for her purpose; which portions he ate.

After some trifling talk between them, I heard him say:

"Good widow, why were you not pleased with my singing that day, long ago, when I stood among the chanters in the church? Was it sinful?"

To which she answered sharply:

"It be always sinful to exalt the horn like the worshippers of Baal and Ashtaroth on every high hill and under every green tree."

"Nay," he replied, "but 'tis like the blessed angels up in heaven, who be always singing anthems. When I go to heaven I will sing there, too, and then I will not be sorry for being hindered from singing here. Only I hope good Master Capel will be there with his violin. I can always sing better when the violin is playing with the harpsichord. Then I feel as if I was no longer a bad little boy, giving offence to you, good widow, but as though I was far away, where I could not be evil-hearted any more—with God and my honoured mother. Does it make you feel like that, widow, when you sing?"

"No," she said, somewhat stiffly, "I have no such carnal emotions. You must fight against them. They will do you great harm. I once knew a young singing child, and he fell into very evil ways. Beware lest you do likewise."

"Oh, tell me about him!" he exclaimed. "Did he sing in the great church in London to which my respected father took me, where the singing children walk two and two, clad in white robes, marching over the wide, stone floor to the sound of the loud playing organ? Did he sing there, good female?"

"Little boys should not be so eager," she replied. "They should not ask questions, but wait in patience for what their elders be pleased to tell them. Listen, and I will tell you a story; and let it sink down into your ears, and bring forth fruit in your heart so that you may repent of your misdoings, and sit in dust, mourning in sackcloth, for all your wickedness."

"Yes, good widow. But prythee tell me about the singing boy!"

"It was many years ago, over in the great church at Ely, a huge black pile placed upon a hill, and visible for miles and miles in that flat countryside. Close by this place I was born, and there I was wed, and there, too, my son was born. He grew up to be a pretty lad, and we called him John. He was fairer than you, with blue eyes, and gold-coloured hair, and all the gentry who came into Ely were wont to remark upon his beauty. But more wonderful than his handsome features was his clear and ringing voice. Many a day he would go carolling through the streets, singing like any bird, and not knowing the value of this gift. At last the master of the choir sent to take him into the number of the singing children. Here, though but the youngest, he rapidly surpassed all, and often have his father and I stood in the great nave while this voice flooded the whole vast space with the most entrancing sound. But then light came. The preachers of godliness came among us shewing that all this was but fleshly pleasure, and no true service of God. My husband and I were the first to receive the Word, and to recognize our sin in suffering our son to minister to evil and superstitious rites. We forbade him to sing not only in the great church but at home. We stopped all his songs and anthems, and showed him the path of righteousness, forcing him to break off from mirth, and to sit in captivity mourning for his sins. But evil had taken hold upon him and the heathen darkness of the church had so worked

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into his blood that he would sing in spite of all that we could do. Once he stole back to his place among the choir children, singing all alone at the daily evening prayer, that very one-voiced part which you sang that day in our parish church, and for which I forsook the House in dudgeon. Whereupon, on his return home, we chastised him with rods to subdue his flesh, and otherwise afflicted him with divers godly disciplines, against which he did nothing but rebel. And so he grew in hardened and evil ways, never bringing his proud will into subjection, but always determined to go back to the fleshpots of Egypt when we would urge him on to the Promised Land. At last he broke his father's heart by taking flight with a band of robbers, affirming, as we have been told, that he would rather live in freedom in the forest than in the bondage of his life at home. Since then I have had but doubtful tidings of him, and little hope: but small wonder is it that I spend my days in bitterness, knowing that my son (whom I loved tenderly) is leading a life of violence which may end on the scaffold in this world, and in everlasting burning in the next. All my own holiness is as nought when I bethink me I shall be in heaven without him."

At this point her voice trembled, and there was a sound as though she was endeavouring to repress a sob; at the same moment she rose hastily and went into the garden, where for sometime afterwards I saw her pacing to and fro alone. That night, as I heard my boy, say his prayers, he offered up a special intercession for the widow's son, entreating that he might be restored to his mother and honest ways.

For me I soon dismissed the subject from my mind, being much beset at this time with considering how I had offended that worthy spinster, good Mistress Tabret Tall. But the boy ceased not every night and morning to make his petition to this one effect, I not hindering him from so good a prayer. At last one night I was awakened from sleep by the lad's voice saying "Father! Father!" For the boy, since his mother's death, slept in a little crib close to my bed, so that I might assist him should he require anything in the night.

"What is it, my son?" I said, "dost thou want a drink of water?"

"No, worthy sir," he answered, "but I have found the widow's son. 'Tis the same kind villain who cut thy thongs the night thou wast bound in the forest, over at Abbot's Oak."

"Truly, my son?" I said, being myself overcome with sleep, and not heeding what he said.

"Yes father; 'tis the very same. Shall we not go and seek him in the morning, and bring him back to his mother, that excellent widow?"

"Very well, my son," I said. "And now, lie down again, and go to sleep."

This he did, I likewise falling into sound slumber from which when I had waked, I had forgotten the incident of the night before. But not so the lad.

"Shall we not set out at once after breakfast?" he asked, as I helped to button his attire.

"Where, my son?" I asked.

"To seek the kind villain, father—the worthy widow's son."

"Not to-day, I think."

"Oh, father, why not? And the good woman grieves. Yesterday I saw her weeping while she was kneading dough, and a tear fell even into the bread. We shall taste the pious dame's tears in our victuals if we seek not her son!"

"'Tis but thy fancy," I replied. "The tall robber is not like to be the son of so virtuous a female."

"Nay, but he is, father," the boy persisted, and nought that I could say, could alter this belief.

After that he ceased not every morning to put to me the same question, enquiring if we should start upon our journey that day, and begging me to delay no longer. And if ever we were near the boundaries of Westhampton parish, nigh to which lay the forest of Abbot's Oak, he would peer restlessly in and out through the hedges and clumps of trees, always hoping to find the widow's son.

One day it happened that I had been over to Little Topping, an outlying part of my parish, having left home on my grey

mare, early in the morning, and not intending to return till after nightfall, eating some victuals at mid-day at the house of Sir John Bree, a worthy gentlemen, the squire of those parts, who had married Susan, daughter to that wicked woman, my Lady Norton, she that spat in the King's face while on his way to execution, for which cause I never could be at ease in the company of my Lady Bree, but directed my conversation as much as possible to that honest squire, Sir John. On this day, it was my intention to remain all the morning and afternoon at Little Topping, and to ride home by twilight. But a heavy cloud coming up, and there being signs of violent wind and rain, I altered my mind, deciding to make for Elmtree about five of the clock, the which I did, arriving at the Vicarage gates about one hour later, and just as the sun was going down in a great halo of wild and lurid clouds, some yellow like fire, and some red, and all pregnant with the tempest.

On entering my grounds I was somewhat surprised at not seeing my little son run down the avenue to meet me, such being his custom whenever he heard my horse's tread. However I thought but little of the matter, and rode round at once to the stables, wishing to see the mare made snug for the night. Returning by the back offices I enquired of the dame as to the lad's whereabouts, but she being busily employed had not observed him since about two hours ago, believing him to be somewhere in the house: Immediately I entered and began to call him loudly by name; but there was no answer. I then proceeded to search all the rooms, but succeeded not in finding him.

"He has gone to play in the meadow, with those Datchet urchins," I said to the dame.

"If he has gone no further," quoth she.

"How further?" I cried.

"Tis not for me to say," said she, in a stiff fashion, "only lads be wild, and singing lads especially. There be of them that have gone to join the robbers before now."

"Peace, good dame," I said sternly, and at once left the house to see if he might be in the meadow playing at catch-the-ball with young Leap-over-the-Wall Datchet, for such was his name,

taken from the eighteenth psalm, by his father, a follower of that unnatural regicide and usurper.

But when I reached the meadow I found no one therein; only the tall grasses being swept by the wind which was now rising, though not yet strong.

"He has gone into the widow's cottage," I said, and at once proceeded into the village to find if it might be so. But no; the worthy family had not seen him, and Leap-over-the-Wall, a rosy cheeked urchin of nine years, with shaggy locks, and little black darting eyes spoke up and said:

"Me thinks, worthy sir, that I espied him several hours ago, (while our mother, this good female, was giving us our mid-day meal) walking on the Westhampton road. I could not perceive where he was going, but his face was dirty."

"I pray no ill may come to him," said the widow anxiously, "'tis like to be wild weather. A tree might be blown down on him, and he be killed. 'Tis a dangerous world, sir."

"Well, mother," said Leap-Over-the-Wall again, "if he be killed, can I go to the funeral? I would cry full loudly, yea roar, if I might be a mourner."

"Peace, child; we'll see," said the widow. And before she could add more words I was gone.

Losing no time I went back to the Vicarage to ask if in the meanwhile he had returned, finding that he had not yet been seen. Then I proceeded to all the haunts where it was possible that he might be, making diligent enquiries of Nathan Longsword, Joyful Dillard, and Sanballat North, boys with whom he was wont to make sport, as well as of that black-eyed young gypsy, Rahab Gidley, the Sidesman's ten-year old wench, she who forsook the company of the maids, and ever played among the lads, leading them into much mischief.

The boys had not seen my son that day, but perceiving that Rahab Gidley looked abashed and confused, I questioned her sternly as to whether he had been with her, to which for some time she stoutly answered No, and then suddenly said Yea, being convicted of falsehood by her own mouth, but little ashamed thereat. Upon this, in spite of my distress about my son, I

paused to rebuke her fault in very noble terms, addressing her as a daughter of Babylon and a wilful perverter of veracity, doomed if she continued thus to everlasting torture by the devil and his fiends in the dark and bottomless abysm. Whereat Rahab Gidley, seated on a low stool in the corner, lifted up her voice and wept loudly, convinced, as I doubt not, of her sin. Seeing her thus penitent, I sat down beside her and urged her to make full confession of her guilt, hoping by this means to come at my son's whereabouts,

"When did you see him last?" I enquired.

"To-day, at no—on," she made answer, her voice broken by sobs, and curious sounds of weeping which I cannot here set down.

"Where?" I asked.

"Up the Westhampton road, close by good Widow Tremlet's garden."

"What were you doing there?"

"He was holding the widow's white gander, while I tied the foot of an old stocking over his beak and head, so that he could neither peck nor see, but could only run about foolish-like, with his head in a bag, not knowing whither he went."

At this the poor creature broke down in sobs, so that I spared to rebuke her more.

"What did you after that?" I proceeded to ask.

"I lifted him through a gap in the widow's hedge."

"To what end?"

"To steal a few of the widow's currants—only a few worthy sir, and not very ripe."

"What then?"

"He crawled back again through the hedge, and we ate the fruit, the which was so sour, and so ill agreed with our stomachs as to remind us that we had sinned in stealing the widow's substance, and might be beaten with rods were it found out at home."

"A good thought. And what happened then?"

"Then we knelt down together on the green grass and prayed that our wrong doing might not be discovered by you, good sir,

or by my honoured father, so that we might not be punished. And then while he was kneeling upright and saying "Our Father which art in heaven" with a loud voice, I opened my eyes, just a little, worthy sir, and espied that he was kneeling close to a little muddy puddle, which he did not perceive, his eyes being fast closed. Then rising softly so that he might not hear, I went up and dabbed my foot very hard in the water so that the mud and wet splashed up suddenly into his face, and upon his clothes, at which he left off to pray. And then I ran away. And indeed I saw him no more, save that as I passed in my flight the Widow Tremlet's gate I heard that pious dame girding at him over the hedge, she having perceived her gander which was now in very evil plight by reason of the stocking tied upon his head. O good sir! I have been a very wicked wench this day, and the evil angels will have me and burn me up! Oh dear! Oh dear!"

Whereupon, being deeply moved by a sense of guilt, Rahab Gidley, that wicked gypsy, rocked herself backwards and forwards, moaning and crying over her offences. But I deferred to give her further ministrations, being exceedingly anxious about my son, and so left the Sidesman's house to go and enquire of the Widow Tremlet.

On my way as I passed the Vicarage, I once more took out the mare, thinking I might have much ground to cover that night, and willing to kill the horse by hard riding if only I might find my son.

As I rode up the Westhampton Road towards the widow's lonely light, a few great drops of rain began to fall, thus adding to my trouble. At the same time the wind rose higher and more fierce, promising to increase by and by to a very hurricane.

Arrived at the cottage and dismounted I found the widow much surprised at receiving a visit from me at this late hour, being now past seven of the clock.

"Have you seen ought of my son this day, good dame?" I cried. "If so, for God's sake tell me with all speed, for I am a most unhappy father!"

"Indeed, I have seen him," she replied, "and in very evil company—namely with that black-eyed young witch of a wench,

Rahab Gidley, she that leads every lad in the village into mischief, while she herself is led of Belial and Apollyon. Eh, but I'll put a charm on her, that will stop her pranks! She'll be lucky if she go not lame, or have a squint at the least. I have a spell that can do both. She it was who this very day tempted your son, good sir, to ill-treat an inoffensive fowl, which is a bird not surpassed for good behaviour and a certain gentility of manner for twenty parishes round. I would you had seen the poor beast with a stocking tied upon his head, he running round the garden in a lamentable frenzy and thinking the end of the world had come; while that iniquitous jade, Rahab Gidley, laughed till she could laugh no more, and then sent that misguided lad, your son, over the hedge to steal currants."

As the dame paused for breath I urged her to tell me all that had taken place, and to give me details as to the last she had seen of my poor boy, giving token by my speech and manner of my anxiety and distress.

"It is little there ever there will be to tell," she went on, "for I much fear that the young child's life is ended."

"Oh, say not so, good woman," I cried out, for her words but spoke a thought that was slowly forming in my own mind. "Surely, you have some charm that will protect him against wind and weather?"

"There is no charm against the will of God," she made reply, "and as he left me to run further up the road I saw Death follow in his tracks. Oh, you may believe me! Did I not foretell to old Granny Hurtle that there would be a funeral in your house before six months, when first I saw you turn the pages of the Holy Book? And did not your good lady fall sick and die? And now to-day I have seen Death in your young child's eyes, and in his curling hair, and in the wild way he left me, and ran on and on, up the road, and ever on, till as I watched him, he became lost to view not far from the boundaries of Westhampton parish, and near the outskirts of the Forest of Abbot's Oak. Eh, but he was a handsome lad, and a good singer; but a stepchild is never the best of wedding gifts, as *she'll* tell you, whom you will fetch home before this day year."

"And did you not see him come back again? Oh, good widow, I beseech you say that he came back again!"

"He has not come back—yet. To-morrow, you will bring him in your own two arms—but he will be cold and helpless, and will not hear you when you speak to him. Go, minister, and ride all night through the storm, ride on and ride hard—and in the morning you will find him, but where you little expect him to be. You are not lucky. It be always hard on a parish when the minister is not lucky. But mount your horse and go! Indeed I am well avenged this night for the evil done to my white gander!"

At this the aged dame, looking very wild, and waving her arms in a manner which caused me fear, opened the door and almost thrust me out. Scarce knowing what I did I mounted once more, and urged my horse on through the storm, which was now exceeding fierce, the wind blowing a fearful gale, and the rain dashing into my face so as to nearly blind me. Now, too, began the lightning to flash, in great quivering sheets of blue and yellow fire, lighting up the wet road before me, so that I could see every pool and tree illumined by a brief, weird glory, which vanishing made the darkness darker than before. Above, the thunder rolled, as if the very heavens would break down; while I rode on and on, fast and furiously, not knowing where I went.

My only thought was that the widow had bidden me do it, to find my boy. For indeed she was a wise woman, and knew things which were hidden from others. Whence she had this knowledge I could not learn, but that she possessed it was beyond all cavil. She could prophesy death and sickness with amazing surety, and she had charms of wondrous efficacy for every sort of plague. By one she could aid infants in bringing through their teeth; by another she could make cows calve; and by another she could foretell to maidens the colour of the hair of the swains whom they would wed. And now when she bade me ride on thus, I could not but think that it must bring me to my son; and even though he should be dead as she had hinted,

and as I also feared, I could at least bring home his body, and lay it beside his mother, in our family vault at Stratton Audley.

The mare herself seemed to feel that the boy was gone, for she dashed onward with little or no stimulus from me. If ever she halted for a moment, or stumbled, I instantly thought the lad's body was at her feet. At times the wind would rise to a high, piercing shriek, and ever and anon it seemed to me that a child's cry was carried on its breath, as though some little boy were lost in a field or wood near by. Then I would stop still, to listen if the cry would come again. But no! The wind would howl more loudly than before, but we could hear no echo of a human voice.

Then we would dash on again, wildly, heedlessly, not thinking where we were, or how the hours went by. If ever we came to a cross road, and there was nothing to guide me which way to turn, I waited for a moment, till a voice within me seemed to say "Go this way" or "go that," and then I would push on again, sometimes passing a wood, and once or twice through a sleeping hamlet, where seeing that the lights were all put out I knew that the night must be far advanced.

Presently I seemed to lose all clear knowledge of what I was about, and even of what I was suffering in the lamentable absence of my son. I rode on, as if I had been riding always, and as if it always had been night. I had no consciousness of being drenched to the skin, but seemed benumbed into an unthinking lethargy. From this condition I was roused by pangs of cold and hunger; and as I began once more to observe the objects by which I passed, I recalled that some of them I had already seen earlier in the night when the lightning had been more vivid. And now I perceived that the wind had gone down, and the thunder rolled no more; only the lightning still flashed faintly, and at long intervals, on the far horizon. Also my poor mare was very nearly spent, dragging herself on through very effort, but stumbling at almost every step from sheer exhaustion.

At last she suddenly stopped still; she could go no more. Slipping to the ground, I stood and cried to pierce the darkness around me; but in vain. I could perceive nothing, but that we

were near to a forest of some kind, and that a mighty oak spread its branches halfway across the road. This afforded some very slight protection from the rain, which was now steadily and straightly coming down, as though it never would stop again. Drawing the poor, jaded mare within that indifferent shelter, I stood for a moment wondering what was to become of me. Here I was in the pitch darkness of the midnight, far from home, ignorant of my whereabouts, my boy probably dead, and little sensation of life left in me. Small wonder is it that I felt heart-broken and God-forsaken. No one in all earth or heaven seemed to care for me, but the gentle, affectionate beast whose warm breath I could feel at that moment upon my cold, wet face and hands. She and I seemed deserted and alone together; and drawing her face close to mine, I buried my countenance in her wet, quivering hide, and, for the first time in many years, burst into unmanly tears.

How long I stood there thus I cannot tell. I think I must have wept myself, even as a child does, into a gentle slumber; for I was sorely worn and weary. I was roused at last by an impatient movement from the mare, who now began to recover from her condition of fatigue, and to wonder why we stood so long in that outlandish spot. When I raised my head I perceived to my surprise and joy that a faint, gray light was growing, and that the dawn had come. The rain, too, had ceased, and the earth was covered with a hot and heavy mist. Looking about, I discovered myself to be in a deep, grassy lane, running through a wood, and in a spot which I did not remember to have ever seen before.

For a few moments I stood, uncertain what to do. Then the mare began to prick up her ears as though she heard something unperceived by me. Listening, I detected the sound of a horse's tread, approaching us at what seemed a quiet trot. Gazing in the direction from which the sound came, I soon made out the form of a tall horseman, not many yards from where I stood. As he came nearer I recognized to my amazement the younger of the two villains who had robbed me that day at Abbot's Oak. He was riding slowly, and held something clasped to his breast,

which at first I supposed the fruit of some midnight deed of violence, but which, as he came abreast of me in the road, I perceived to be my son.

With a cry of joy, I sprang to the head of the villain's horse for they would have passed without seeing me, the light as yet being dim.

"Stand back!" cried the robber, "or I will fire."

"It is I," I answered joyfully, "and no highwayman. It is this young child's father, who has been searching for him all this dreary night."

At the sound of my voice the boy languidly raised his head from the villain's shoulder, and I came close. The lad was very white and weak, and wrapped in a rough garment which I had never seen him wear. He smiled faintly, but did not move, saying in a very weak voice:

"I have found the widow's son, father. You will forgive me, will you not? I have been a wicked boy to frighten good Widow Tremlet's gander; but she told me, were I to return home that you would chastise me with a rod, also giving me bread and water of affliction. And so I ran away, thinking I would go at last and find this gentle villain, and bring him home. But it was very far to Abbot's Oak, and then I lost my way, and wandered into a lane, and deep into the middle of a wood. Then I grew very frightened and wanted to go home, but I could not find the road, and so knelt down to pray. Then it became dark and rained, and I cried; and then I slept, and then I woke up, and then the kind villian came and found me. Oh, do not punish me, worthy sir, for I have been afflicted sore this night with cold and hunger, and methinks am well punished as I am!"

"Come to me!" I said, raising my arms.

Whereat the villain gently lifted him down to me, and the boy flinging his arms closely about my neck, and laying his head upon my shoulder burst into tears of relief and joy.

For some moments we said nothing; and then I turned to thank the kind cut-throat for his gentleness and care, begging him at the same time to tell me where and how he had found my precious offspring.

"There is but little to say. I was returning late last night from a visit to Monk's Oldbarn made for my own purposes, and was riding towards the place you wot of" he said, nodding his head in the direction of Abbot's Oak, "when the storm came on. Hoping to get to our nest the sooner, I took a short cut through the forest, by a by-path known as Primrose Lane, urging my horse forwards so as to get under cover the more quickly. As I rode on, thinking of nothing in particular, my horse suddenly shied and plunged, and then after backing a few paces, as if frightened, stood quite still. Knowing that there must be some cause for the terror of so wise a beast, I held my breath and listened. As I did so, a sound was borne to me upon the wind, which caused me for the moment to fear that I was dead and in the other world, though I could not understand why such as I could be so pleasant a part of it. For in the heart of that wild forest, there rose above all the howling of the tempest, and the wind among the trees, a voice which I could not but think to be an angel's. It sang clear and firm, those words which I myself had so often chanted in the great, black Church at Ely, and which I last had heard in the thicket at Abbot's Oak. *Oh, put thy trust, put thy trust in God—in God—in God!* Those were the words, and as I heard them I looked each moment for the Angel of Death to come and carry me somewhere,—to the fiends, may be. But the moment the voice ceased, another cry went up, very bitter, and in a little child's tones, 'Mother! Oh, Mother!' Then I knew it was some young thing lost, God knew how, in that wild wood."

"Did he not say *Father?*" I asked, hoping that the good cut-throat might be mistaken, and that the boy in his distress had called for me.

"No," he persisted. "He said, *Mother*, quite plain;" with which I was fain to be content.

"At the moment when this cry went up," the villain continued, "a most terrible flash of lightning lit up all the road, and the forest roundabout; and there before me in the lane knelt the figure of a little boy, his two hands clasped in prayer. It needed no second thought to tell me whose child it was, for there are not

two voices like that in this county or the next, and I know what the value of a boy's voice is from the life I led long ago at Ely.

In an instant I was down from my horse, and beside him on the grass. A second flash of lightning, coming very quickly after the other, enabled us to see each other. With a cry he threw himself into my arms, clasping his hands about my neck, and saying, 'O villain, villain! Thank God you have come. I was so frightened, good villain! And you will take care of me and fetch me home.' It almost seemed as if he had expected me to come; and indeed he told me afterwards that he had prayed to God that he might find me, Who, I doubt not answered his petition, His mercy being great, as I also know, though I am but a wicked robber.

I would have taken him home at once, good sir, only I knew not the way in such darkness, and the child was very wet and cold so that I deemed it wiser to get him under shelter as soon as might be. For divers reasons I thought it best not to seek the nest at Abbot's Oak, or to bring so innocent a lad among abandoned men, such as my comrades mostly are; and so I took another road, bringing us to a little retreat, very secure and secret, which we keep for time of need. Arrived here I was able to strike a light, and prepare the young child a bed. So exhausted was he that he had fallen sound asleep before I had made ready the not too luxurious couch; but when I came to lay him in it I found him to be so wet that it would surely kill him to sleep in such a state of dampness. Whereupon I was in a great strait there being no dry article of clothing in that place, and no means of making fire. In this predicament I did that which, I doubt not, was wrong. Stripping his own wet raiment from him, I took off my own shirt, which was the only dry garment I had on me, and laid the young child therein, being a dishonour to the son of so worthy a divine as you, good sir, the garment having no merit but that of being dry. And in it he is wrapped at this moment, all his own attire being still unfit to put upon him without great risk to his health, the which, I fear, is already much affected. And so I deliver him up to you, worthy sir, glad to be relieved from going into the town of Elmtoft, where the sheriffs would

surely be upon me, unless I found means to escape them, the which, I doubt not, I could do."

Having heard the excellent robber's recital, I thanked him for his kindness, with great warmth, and even with tears in my eyes. Also I urged him to come into the town, declaring that my little boy believed him to be the son of that good widow, Mistress Watchful Wake. But at this word, from some cause which I could not learn, he suddenly flushed up, and rapidly turning his horse, rode away, without even wishing me good day.

Being thus left alone with my son, I had no more to do but to take him back to Elmtoft, finding that I was nearer the town than I had thought, having made a circuit during the night of all the lanes in the parishes of Elmtoft and Westhampton, thus being within a mile of good Widow Tremlet's cottage, which was on the outskirts of our town.

Early as it was that virtuous person was at her garden-gate as I passed by, my son lying in my arms unconscious through sheer weariness, though not asleep.

"Eh, but you have found him!" she cried, as I approached. "And is he dead? No? But dying, minister; you'll never bring him out of that stupor into which he is falling. Did I not foretell you: first wife's death? And did I not say, but yesternight, that you would find him and bring him home in your own arms, but that he would neither speak to you, nor hear you when you spoke? Even so, my word has come to pass. Go home with your burden, minister! Make his coffin, and dig his grave! He'll trouble no more ganders!"

For God's sake, peace, good woman," I cried, and urged my weary steed onwards.

And so I fetched him home.

IV.

It was long ere I could give up hope. The leech, that worthy man, bled the lad for the fever which lay upon him, and burned within him, as if it would consume the soul out of his poor little body. For many days he tossed about upon his bed, not knowing me or any that stood by, but only raving of Rahab Gidley, that wicked gypsy, and Widow Tremlet, and the gentle cut-throat. At times he babbled sweetly of the evening prayer in the great Church at Westminster, and of the woman we had seen burnt at Smithfield; but through all, his mind wandered helpless in vain imaginings in a manner most painful to behold.

When at last the fever left him, and consciousness returned, he lay on his couch so weak and white, that gazing on him I could scarce restrain my tears. The kind leech bade us give him anything he desired; but all our grief was that he desired nothing. He seemed to have lost all interest in earth; and to be very weary of life already, when he scarce had lived. Each day his strength decreased, and the leech could only bid us find something to bring his half-departed soul back to the world again. Could we do that, he might be saved.

"What can I give you, my little boy?" I whispered, laying my head close to his upon the pillow.

"Nothing," he said, gently, but listlessly.

"Will you not have your toys?"

"No, father."

"Nor your bow and arrow?"

"No, worthy sir."

"Shall I play upon the harpsichord?"

"No."

"Would you like to see Joyful Dillard, and Sanballat North, and have them play catch-the-ball here in thy chamber? Yes thou wouldst like that, my precious offspring?"

"No, good sir!"

"Then Rahab Gidley shall come and make faces for thee. She can make rare faces, with her tongue very far out, and her

two eyes rolling different ways at once. Thou knowest she has often made thee laugh. Shall we have her fetched?"

"Yes!" he said brightening a little for the very first time.

Then we sent with all speed, for Rahab Gidley, that Moabitish damsel of ten years old, whom seeing my boy smiled faintly, though he had not done so before. At this we all took heart, and seated Rahab Gidley on a high chair in the midst of the room, saying unto her, "Make faces!"

But that wicked person, now that her evil ways might have done some good, did only swing her feet, putting her finger in her mouth, and looking very much abashed and ill at ease, also hanging down her head, but rolling her black eyes upwards.

And all the while the leech, good Widow Wake, Warden North, and Beadle Josiah Dillard stood round saying, "Make faces!" in very imperious tones; yet would she not, but at last put out her lip as though she meant to weep, whereat we led her from the room, she having done my son no good at all.

Then were we in great straits as to what to suggest next; for his strength was sinking fast, and ever and anon his spirit seemed ready to take flight. And so it chanced that very eve, about seven of the clock, that good Master Richard Capel, having heard of my son's sickness, arrived from Queen's Lynn, bringing with him his violin.

His entry into the room moved my little boy as nothing else had done. After he had kissed the good man, he bade him play, saying that one word "Play!" with such eagerness as to give us hope.

"What shall I play, my boy?" Master Capel said. "Choose thou!"

Then the child sighed.

"Play," he said, "the old, sweet hymn, 'Jerusalem, my happy home;' the one my honoured mother loved, and which we sang so often to please her in our home at Queen's Lynn."

Very softly and slowly the worthy man, seated by the bedside and drawing the bow most gently, played the old, quaint air.

The little boy's eyes seemed to grow larger, and more thoughtful, and to be gazing at something far away.

As the air began the second time, to the surprise of all of us he sang :

“Jerusalem, my happy home !
Name ever dear to me !
When shall my labours have an end ?
Thy joys when shall I see ?”

For the first few verses the voice was weak and faltering ; and then it burst forth as clear and strong as I had ever heard it :

“Jerusalem ! Jerusalem !
God grant I soon may see
Thy endless joys, and of the same
Partaker aye to be.
Thy walls are made of precious stones,
Thy bulwarks diamonds square,
Thy gates are of right orient pearl,
Exceeding rich, and rare.
Thy turrets and thy pinnacles
With carbuncles do shine,
Thy very streets are paved with gold,
Surpassing clear and fine.
Thy houses are of ivory,
Thy windows crystal clear,
Thy tiles are made of beaten gold,
—O God that I were there !”

Then with a full burst of melody, and with an unearthly sweetness which even that wondrous voice had never possessed before, (the violin too rising to such a pitch of beauty, as if its tones would go with the young soul through the very gates of Paradise) he sang the words :—

“Ah, my sweet home, Jerusalem !
Would God I were in thee !
Then shall my labours have an end,
When I thy joys shall see.”

At which he ceased to sing, gazing before him as at first, the eyes becoming almost fixed.

“‘Tis death !” said a whispered voice behind me.

Turning. I saw the Widow Tremlet, who had come to see the end.

"He will soon go now," she said.

But I could not wait for that. It was beyond my power to stand by and see my child die. Others would do that for me. I passed into the cool, night air.

A full moon lit up the garden with a splendid light, but I did not heed it. Pacing up and down the lonely walks, I felt my heart breaking. I wished that it might break, that I, too, might die. Why did not God take me, when He was taking all I cared for? Gazing up into the starry heavens He had made, I almost cursed Him! I feared to do it, quite; and yet for the moment I felt as though the great Being were using His resistless power to torture, but not crush me.

With bitter thoughts I walked to and fro, suffering beyond all words to tell; and waiting only for the messenger to say that he was dead.

And then, strangely, a few old thoughts came back into my mind—words of the Bible, words of the Psalms, words of my own Blessed Lord's. And then, with a sigh that was almost a sob, I fell upon my knees on the cool, damp grass, with the moonlight streaming upon me, and prayed as One had prayed in another garden long ago, "Father, if this cup may not pass from me, except I drink it, Thy will be done,"

How long I knelt there I know not; but I was roused by a rustling at the hedge near by. Glancing up I saw a man looking over, and gazing at the house. I knew him in the moonlight. It was the tall robber. Taking advantage of the night, he had run all risks to come for tidings of the child.

"How is he?" he asked softly, as I approached.

"Dying—or dead!" was all that I could say.

"Let me see him, but once more!"

"Come!" I said, and led him through the garden-door, within the house.

All was quite in the sick-room. Those present were kneeling down. The boy still breathed.

As we approached the bed, he at first took no heed. Then

as he fixed his gaze upon the robber a look of heavenly joy overspread his face, and his soul seemed to come back into his very eyes.

Flinging his arms around the tall man's neck, he drew him down towards him.

"O villain! villain!" he cried, "you have come at last; and now the excellent widow will be no more sad, and you will always live with my honoured father—and with me. Father, I shall be well soon. And the villain will play with me. We shall have catch-the-ball in the meadow; and we shall go bird's-nesting with Rahab Gidley; and I shall let the villain have a turn with my bow and arrow. O, good villain, how happy we shall be!"

Thus my child was saved. And now he is near come to man's estate, and is a good son to me. The villain and his mother, that pious widow, have long been reconciled. And I, Thomas Treadwell, am waiting only for my summons home, when I hope to lie side by side with my dear wife, that excellent creature, in our family burying place at Stratton Audley; lying near my honoured father, and Mistress Dorothy Treadwell, my dear and honoured mother.